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ABSTRACT

The 1970 International Educational Achievement (IEA) survey placed New Zealand's nine and fourteen year olds first in reading achievement in comparison with all other participating countries. Literacy educators the world over have studied New Zealand's methods and classroom environments, and its approaches to reading/writing instruction have been adopted in many countries. Reading Recovery, developed by Marie Clay in the 1970s, has become a key intervention program in Britain, Australia, and the United States. But the IEA survey of 1990 showed that New Zealand has slipped in ranking, and their children had the greatest difference between high achievers and low achievers. A 1996 adult literacy survey was also disappointing. Several factors have probably contributed to the changing literacy profile of New Zealand: the number of multiethnic children from backgrounds other than English has greatly increased; socioeconomic factors have led to polarization of wealth and living conditions; and curriculum demands on schools have increased both in diversity and content. Some have recommended that New Zealand adopt phonics programs instead of the natural language philosophy of literacy instruction. A Literacy Taskforce identified several issues affecting literacy instruction but did not recommend a major change. Central to a number of the recommendations was ongoing professional development for educators, focusing on effective use of teaching approaches, monitoring and assessment, and use of running records. The government set as its goal the enhanced reading and achievement of children in the first four years of schooling. Reading Recovery and Resource Teachers of Reading provide literacy intervention, and funds have been allocated to a pool to which schools can apply to establish programs to support at-risk learners. (NKA)

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by Libby Limbrick

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The Literacy Debates: what are the issues in New Zealand

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For the past two to three decades New Zealand has held an enviable position in the literacy stakes. The International Educational Achievement survey of 1970 placed New Zealand's nine and fourteen year olds first in reading achievement in comparison with all other participating countries. Literacy educators from many parts of the world have studies our methods and classroom environments; our literacy materials have been exported to other parts of the world; and our approaches to reading and writing instruction have been adopted in many countries.

Throughout the world educators are aware of Sylvia Ashton Warner and Don Holdaway and their philosophies. Their emphasis on building literacy instruction on the experiences of the child and the importance of using natural language texts and the inter-relatedness of reading and writing have influenced instruction in a number of other countries as well as New Zealand.

Reading Recovery, developed by Marie Clay in the 1970's, has become a key intervention programme in many states of the USA, in UK and in Australia. Professional development models such as the Early Reading Inservice Course and the Later Reading Inservice Course for school wide professional development in balanced literacy programmes were adopted by a number of other countries. In the early 1990's Time magazine wrote an article eulogising our levels of literacy and the instructional approaches in our schools.

However in New Zealand, as in Britain, the USA and Australia, in recent years the media has lamented the falling literacy standards of young people. Last year, a major newspaper carried a front page headline "New Zealand Loses Its Crown in Reading". Talk back radio and populist journalism have claimed that children cant write, spell and read as well as their parents when they were at school.

Many of these concerns are the result of fairly superficial and negative interpretations of reports on literacy levels, a fairly frequent tendency of the media. Nonetheless there are issues that are troubling and indications that all is not well with literacy achievement for all New Zealanders.

The 1990 IEA (Elley, 1992) identified that, in comparison with other participating countries, our mean achievement levels had slipped. Twenty years on from the stunning results of 1970, our 14 year olds were ranked 4th and our 9 years olds were ranked 7th. This is still a significant achievement especially when an the analysis of the data demonstrates that we have more "good readers" than any other country. Furthermore our fourteen year olds, whose home language was that of the school, English, scored the highest in the world.

The bad news from this survey; was that we had the greatest difference between the high achievers and the low achievers. These achievement gaps were between boys and girls, and between children for whom the language of home was that of the school and those for whom it was not. Amongst the low achievers were high numbers of Maori and Pacific Island students and students in low decile schools. It would appear that New Zealand literacy education is not meeting the needs of all children in our society.

Wilkinson (1998) undertook a further fine grained analysis of the IEA study to identify variables associated with the gender and home language differences. There were some interesting and unexpected findings. The achievement gap was less where teachers' assessment was regular and specific, perhaps indicating their ability to cater for individual differences. It was also less where teachers read aloud frequently to students. It was greater where there was a high amount of silent reading, and in composite classes. This latter variable would appear to relate to teachers' opportunities to provide direct and individualised support.

In a survey of adult literacy in 1996 of prose, narrative and quantitative literacy, the preliminary findings of an international comparison indicated that about one third of New Zealand adults demonstrated literacy levels below that required to operate efficiently in today's society. Clearly this is of concern. Further analysis of the data shows that those in the 50 year old and above cohorts achieved lowest mean scores, so that factors other than current school based literacy practices must be involved. Once again, however, amongst those with low levels of literacy were a very high percentage of Maori, Pacific Island and other ethnic minority adults.

A third national study of school achievement has also identified some worrying trends. The National Educational Monitoring Project of Reading and Speaking (Flockton ad Crooks, 1997) and Listening and Writing (Flockton and Crooks, 1999), has once again reported that Maori and Pacific Island, and children for whom English is a second language, are in the lowest scoring ranges. This project uses contextualised assessment tasks linked to the curriculum achievement objects to establish a profile of achievement for students in Year 4 (9

years olds) and children in Year 8 (12-13 years olds). It assesses a representative national sample, in four year cycles, over a range of curriculum areas.

A number of factors have probably contributed to the changing literacy profile in New Zealand. Immigration patterns in recent years have changed so that the number of children in schools from backgrounds other than English has greatly increased. Whereas in the 1970s the population of most schools consisted mainly of Pakeha and Maori children, schools today are multi-ethnic with many children entering school with little or no English. Socio-economic factors have led to a greater polarisation of wealth and living conditions which have been reflected frequently in school resources and support structures. School Entry Assessment (1987) has been identifying longer differences in children's ones language. In addition curriculum demands on schools have increased both in diversity and content. School entry levels SEA.

Some sources have asserted that the philosophy underlying literacy instruction that is inadequate, and that New Zealand's holistic, natural language philosophy of literacy instruction does not meet the needs of all learners. They have recommended that New Zealand adopt phonics based programmes such as those mandated in California on the grounds that California is adoption of skills based phonic programmes was because Whole Language programmes had led to declining standards.

The claim that California's literacy levels have declined due to New Zealand Whole Language programmes, adopted in the 1980's needs examination. Several points should be noted:

I) methodology is unlikely to be the only cause of any reported literacy level decline. California demographics have changed in recent years with greater numbers of non-English speaking people and, contemporaneously, a reduction in resources for bilingual programmes;

ii) the tests used for comparative purposes may not be appropriate as they do not provide information on the population as a whole, only on those intending to enter University,

iii) California's adoption of New Zealand methodology was piecemeal: the result of intermittent workshops in the USA; short term visits by US educators to New Zealand and the marketing by publishers of New Zealand resources in the USA. New Zealand does not advocate a Whole Language Programme as promoted in California. New Zealand programmes emphasise holistic and balanced approaches using natural language, in contrast to contrived decodable texts, in which the teaching of skills play ;an important part unlike the more extreme Whole Language Programmes. In New Zealand instructional programmes, word level skills are explicitly taught but in relation to the learner's need and the context in which they are used.

The concerns raised in the literacy surveys have been taken seriously none the less by educators.

In October 1998 the New Zealand Minister of Education announced a Literacy (and Numeracy) strategy. A Literacy Taskforce was formed to examine the issues. The Minister announced the goal that "By 2005 every child turning 9 will be able to read and write (and do maths) for success". This taskforce, consisting of classroom practitioners, principals, literacy

consultants, teacher educators and representatives of the Ministry of Education were advised by a Literacy Experts Group, academics with theoretical and research expertise in literacy. The LEG based their advice on recent reports on literacy, including the extensive work reported by Snow et al (1998) in the USA, the Australian report on Literacy for (1998)" as well as international and New Zealand based research.

Working to a tight timeline the Taskforce identified a number of issues affecting literacy instruction and contributing to the disparity between those students not succeeding in literacy and the high achievers. The report submitted to the Minister of Education in April made a range of recommendations, a number of which are being implemented already.

Despite the public concern over literacy, fired by media sensationalising the debate as "Reading Wars", the Taskforce did not recommend a major change in the philosophy or practice of literacy instruction in New Zealand. Neither did it recommend prescribing specific literacy approaches or practices. However it did remind teachers and schools of the importance of a balanced approach, and of being aware of the need to support children to develop appropriate strategies for breaking the code, in order to make meaning of the text. Most of the recommendations emphasised the need to enhance and refine existing practice through supporting teachers and schools to make informed decisions for their local community.

Central to a number of the recommendations was on going professional development for teachers, principals and literacy leaders in a school. It was recommended that the principles of "best practice" be debated and established and that a shared understanding of the knowledge, understandings and attitudes that one would expect of a 9 year old, reading and

writing for success, be developed by literacy educators. These profiles of achievement should be the basis of assessing the achievement of the Government's goal rather than externally referenced and administered assessment tasks.

A professional development package focusing on effective use of teaching approaches, monitoring and assessment, particularly the use of running records accessible to all teachers similar to the ERIC and LARIC courses was seen to be essential. With the policy of greater autonomy for schools in New Zealand to enable them to respond to community needs, there has been less consistency in literacy in-service support. In addition, following the teacher shortage in New Zealand a few years ago there are a considerable number of teachers who have not been trained within the New Zealand education system.

Furthermore provision of teacher education has changed within recent years. A few years ago there were only 6 Colleges of Education educating beginning teachers. Today, with the Governments encouragement of private training institutions, there are now 30 university, polytech, College of Education and private providers. Thus, combined with Government funding for shorter courses, especially post graduate courses, it appears that teachers' education is more variable. Also recommended, therefore, was a review of teacher education in literacy be implemented to ascertain how well teachers are prepared for teaching the critical years of literacy acquisition. It was also recommended that the Education Review Office, the body with responsibility for monitoring the implementation of the National Educational Guidelines and the National Achievement Guidelines, be required to explicitly report on literacy and numeracy in the first years of school.

No pedagogical approach will meet the needs of all children. Reading Recovery has for more than ten years now provided a catch up opportunity for 20% of New Zealand children who, because of differing early educational experiences, learning styles and language backgrounds, can have difficulty with literacy. The policy is that the lowest achieving children at the end of their first year at school will have access to Reading Recovery. However this may mean that many children, particularly those in low decile schools, do not receive the support they need to develop successful strategies. Without unlimited resources this may mean intervention resources need to be target to those who need them most.

Paradoxically, despite a considerable body of research on Reading Recovery (Askew, Fountas, Lyons, Pinnell & Schmitt, 1998) demonstrating its efficacy in other countries, there is limited independent research in New Zealand. One study (Tunmer & Chapman 1998), restricted to a fairly small sample, suggested that Reading Recovery did not best meet the needs of children with poorly developed phonemic awareness, those who were most likely to be in the lowest 20% of their cohort. Questions have also been asked as to the timing of Reading Recovery intervention. Is six years too late to identify under achievement trends, and intervene, for some children? For other children maximum benefit from Reading Recovery may be gained later when oral language skills are better developed. For children who enter school from backgrounds other than English this would appear an important consideration.

New Zealand schools are fortunate in having a superb system such as Reading Recovery and Resource Teachers of Reading, who work with children needing intervention beyond this first phase. However the taskforce recognised that these two services needed to be nationally co-ordinated, and reviewed to enhance their effectiveness and targeted at children who are currently not achieving.

How will the Government Goal be measured?

One of the great dilemmas in education is developing authentic and manageable assessment tools. The IEA analysis noted that close monitoring was associated with high levels of achievement. It was suggested that cumulative records of students progress be developed so that ongoing monitoring and informed teaching can support learners even those who are transient.

A previous green paper on Assessment had advised against standardized national assessment task. The Taskforce endorsed this view and recommended the development of externally referenced assessment tools against which schools can assess their children. The process of developing profiles of the 9 year old reader and writer are now under way.

Maori Children in Immersion or bilingual programmes

While most Maori children are educated in mainstream classrooms increasing numbers are in Maori immersion or bilingual programmes. Te Reo Maori is an official language in New Zealand as well as English. This move to Maori immersion educational settings, Te Kohanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa, has been partly in response to Maori recognising that their children have not succeeded in the mainstream system, as well as commitment to maintaining the Maori language and culture. Literacy Taskforce thus identified an urgent need to develop instructional resources, assessment tasks and professional development in Maori to ensure the literacy gap is reduced. Simply translating English resources, either for teachers or students, into a Maori medium does not provide appropriate support. For Maori children literacy instructional needs are different. For example Maori is a phonetically regular language unlike English.

For many Maori children in immersion settings Maori is not the language of their home because, until recently, Maori language has been declining in use. Whereas the principles of best practice may be applicable, the instructional approaches match their learning needs. As such, a Maori translation of Reading Recovery is not likely to overcome the achievement needs. A similar but specific programme needs to be developed.

Other recommendations

Alongside the Literacy Taskforce's recommendation a number of other strategies have been put in place.

Funds have been allocated to a pool to which schools can apply for funds to establish programmes to support learners at risk. Criteria for this funding requires evidence parental and the community involvement, as well as proven effectiveness. The Taskforce and the Ministry recognises the critical role that parents and community play in literacy development therefore a communication strategy targeted at the communities most at risk, the low income communities and Maori and Pacific Island communities, has been established. This communication strategy stresses the importance of literacy activities and the accessibility of literacy in everyday activities.

The Government set as its goal the enhanced reading and achievement of children in the first four years of schooling. This is important if we are to ensure literacy for all. I believe however that there is another and almost greater challenge for schools today, certainly for school in New Zealand. If we can ensure that the *espoused* principles of best practice in junior classes *are* the practices of best practice we will have achieved a lot. But another

critical issue today is ensuring that "best practice" continues into the middle and upper primary schools and there is ongoing development of literacy skills to deal with the increasing complexity of texts. For example, Internet texts, often dense in structure and representing views that are from diverse perspectives at times and from sources that have dubious validity and credibility need evaluation from a critical literacy perspective. Research (Flockton & Crooks, 1997, 1999) suggests that our children are reading, orally, with accuracy and with adequate retelling of the content. For many children the challenge lies in processing the information and responding with higher order levels of text analysis, and in conveying their ideas coherently, cogently and accurately in writing.

As International Literacy Day is celebrated it timely to examine our conditions for literacy learning and the practices to ensure literacy for all. We in New Zealand have taken on the challenge.

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